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ABSTRACT

This report presents the results of two experimental studies undertaken to investigate some of the differences in success and failure attributions made by actors and observers in an achievement situation. Causal attributions of a person actually experiencing a success or failure (the actor) and someone who read about the situation (the observer) were compared. Both sets of subjects were volunteers drawn from college introductory psychology and geology classes. Actors were found to be relatively more likely to perceive their outcomes as caused by external factors (task difficulty and luck), while observers attributed these outcomes more to internal factors (effort). Attributions for both actors and observers were also strongly affected by whether the outcome was a success or failure. Hypotheses concerning sex differences in attributions were only weakly supported. (Author)

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ATTRIBUTIONS OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE FOR MALES AND FEMALES AS ACTORS AND OBSERVERS

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Abstract

Causal attributions of a person actually experiencing a success or failure (the actor) and someone who read about the situation (the observer) were compared. Results supported Jones and Nisbett (1971). Actors were relatively more likely to perceive their outcomes as caused by external factors (task difficulty and luck), while observers attributed these outcomes more to internal factors (effort). Attributions for both actors and observers were also strongly affected by whether the outcome was a success or failure. Hypotheses concerning sex differences in attributions were only weakly supported.

ATTRIBUTIONS OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE FOR MALES AND FEMALES AS ACTORS AND OBSERVERS

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Jones and Nisbett (1971) suggested that actors and observers have very different views about why the actor behaves in the way he or she does. They reviewed experimental literature showing that an actor tends to attribute his or her behavior to situational factors, while an observer of the same behavior tends to perceive it as the result of stable personal characteristics of the actor. A number of studies have confirmed this general proposition (*e.g.*, McArthur, 1972; Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek, 1973; Storms, 1973). These studies, however, have tended to focus upon actor/observer differences in social situations.

The present two studies investigate some of the differences in attributions made by actors and observers in an achievement situation. It is hypothesized that the general tendency noted by Jones and Nisbett (1971) for the actor to attribute his or her behavior to situational factors and for the observer to attribute this behavior to stable characteristics of the actor will be present in an achievement situation. However, it is also hypothesized that these tendencies will be affected by the positivity or negativity of the outcome. Specifically, it is expected that the actor/observer attributional difference will be magnified in a failure situation, since actors would be most likely to attribute their behavior to situational factors in such a situation.

Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest, and Rosenbaum (1971) have outlined four causal attributions made in achievement situations: ability,

effort, luck, and task difficulty. These causes differ along two dimensions. Ability and effort are within the person and are thus internal, while luck and task difficulty are outside the person and are thus external. Also, ability and task difficulty are relatively constant over time as a person reattempts the same task, while effort and luck can fluctuate widely. Therefore, the former causes, ability and task difficulty, are both stable, even though one is internal and the other external. Similarly, effort and luck are both unstable and also differ along the internal-external dimension. These dimensions have been meaningfully employed in previous studies of attributions of the causes of achievement success and failure. A number of studies have demonstrated that different causal attributions tend to be made in success and failure situations (i.e., Feather & Simon, 1971; Frieze & Weiner, 1971). In general, people tend to attribute success more to internal factors and failure more to external and/or unstable factors (Frieze, 1973; Frieze & Weiner, 1971).

A few studies have explored how actors and observers differentially react to success and failure in making attributions (e.g., Frieze & Weiner, 1971; Ruble 1973). In a simulation situation where subjects were told to imagine either themselves or someone else succeeding or failing in an achievement situation, results supported the hypothesis that actors would attribute their outcomes more to situational factors while observers would utilize more internal, stable attributions. However, these results were modified by the outcome which had more overall effect than the actor/observer manipulation. In general, there was a tendency within both actor and observer groups to attribute more internal factors and stable factors to the success situation than to the failure one (Ruble, 1973). In another simulation study reported by Frieze and Weiner (1971), outcome had a very strong effect, but no actor/observer differences were found. Since this study controlled the type and amount of information available in both the actor and observer conditions (e.g., percent of past successes of

the actor, time spent on task), it is perhaps not surprising that no actor/observer differences were found. Differential information has been seen as a key reason for actor/observer differences (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). A weakness in both these studies, however, is that the actor did not actually experience success or failure but rather was asked to imagine such a situation.

In one behavioral study by Feather and Simon (1971), pairs of subjects were asked to solve anagrams. The outcomes of the performance were experimentally manipulated so that subjects could succeed or could fail. When subjects were asked to make attributions about the causes of their own and their partner's success or failure, the results indicated that when the other person succeeded at the task, there was a greater tendency to attribute his/her success to internal dispositions (i.e., ability) than when one's own outcome was success. But when the other person failed at the task, there was a greater tendency to attribute his/her failure to external factors (i.e., bad luck) than when one's own outcome was failure. Thus, there was only partial support in this study for Jones and Nisbett. In Feather and Simon's (1971) experiment, both the observer and the actor performed the same task. As a result, "the test items created a situation in which social comparison could occur and where social motives were elicited" (p. 168). Because of these other motives, this study may not have been a valid test of actor/observer differences in achievement attributions.

The situations used by Feather and Simon and by Frieze and Weiner are unusual because in both of them the actor and the observer have exactly the same information about the task. Jones and Nisbett (1971) base their theory on situations in which an observer merely observes an actor. Therefore, they assume that the information available to the actor is very different from that available to the observer and that this difference is an important

factor in understanding why actors and observers vary in their attributions. As Jones and Nisbett noted, the actor and the observer differ both in their orientations to a situation and in the information available to them. The actor knows more about the motivations and abilities he brings to the situation and about his own past history. He is sensitive to variations in his behavior over time and thus may have a tendency to see his present behavior as differing from the past because of the immediate situational variables. The observer, on the other hand, typically has no knowledge of the differences over time in the behavior and feelings of the actor within the context of the situation and sees differences between people in a particular situation as attributable to the unique characteristics of those individuals.

If informational differences are the important underlying factor in actor/observer differential attributions, then behavioral studies in which the observer receives information about the actor who actually performs the task are necessary for these differences to emerge. In the present study, subjects in the actor condition experienced success or failure on a task and then were asked to make attributions about the causes of the experimentally manipulated outcome. The observer received information about the actor's task and outcome and was asked to make similar attributions about the actor's performance. All the subjects made their attributions to four causes: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck.

A final set of variables investigated in the studies reported here was the sex of the actor and the sex of the observer. It was hypothesized that female actors would be expected to do less well by male and female observers and, therefore, the observers would be less likely to attribute female actors' success to their ability. A number of studies have demonstrated that women are expected to perform more poorly than males on a large variety of tasks (see Frieze, in press). If women are believed to have lower abilities, then when they do succeed, their successes should be attributed relatively more to other causal factors and less to ability.

Support for this line of reasoning, that women's successes are less often attributed to ability and more to other factors, was found by Feldman-Summers and Kiesler (1974). Although both sexes have traditionally had lower expectations for women, recent data (summarized by Frieze, in press) suggests that women are beginning to view the sexes more equally and sometimes have even higher expectations for the performance of women than for men's performances. Thus, it was also hypothesized that observer differences in attributions made about male and female actors would be stronger for male than female observers.

Study I

Study I investigated attributional differences in actors and observers where the actor actually experienced success or failure, but the observer was removed from the situation. Observers and actors were of the same sex.

Method

Subjects were 245 volunteers from introductory psychology and geology classes. Five subjects were eliminated from the analyses for failing to complete all materials, leaving 120 males and 120 females who were run in groups that ranged in size from four to eight, depending upon random assignment by two male experimenters.

Actor condition. The subjects (60 males and 60 females) entered a classroom in groups and were randomly assigned to separate desks. One experimenter introduced himself and told the subjects that they were going to take part in a study designed to gain information about problem solving processes. Each subject was given a set of 25 anagrams (groups of letters which had to be rearranged to form a meaningful English word). They were given 30 seconds to work on each anagram. Two sets of

anagrams were used--one set contained easy items which allowed subjects receiving this set to solve most of them, while the second set was very difficult and only a few were solved. Subjects were told that they needed to solve at least 13 anagrams to achieve success in the task. Thus, the group receiving easy anagrams experienced success, while the group with difficult anagrams failed the task.

Observer condition. Information about a hypothetical actor's behavior was given to observers in a printed form. First, subjects were instructed, "Imagine yourself observing a person of the same sex, and about the same age as you, involved in a problem solving situation in the presence of seven other students. The person that you observe receives the following instruction." Then subjects were given the instructions that were given to the actor. These instructions were identical to the ones used for the subjects in the actor condition. Half of the subjects were then told that the observed person failed at the task and half were told that the observed person succeeded at the task. Each observer was asked to rate the causes for the performance of only this actor.

Dependent Variables

The actors and the observers were given a written post-experimental questionnaire by the experimenters. Actors were asked their beliefs about their abilities at this sort of task, effort exerted to succeed, the difficulty of the task, and luck in doing the task. In addition, actors were asked to evaluate their performance at the task, to express their level of satisfaction with their performance and their expectancies for future performance at this type of task. Observers were asked all the same seven questions concerning the actor (e.g., "How much ability do you think the observed person has at this sort of task?"; "How hard do you think the observed person tried to succeed at the task?"; etc.).

Results

Each of the four causal attribution ratings (ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck) and ratings for evaluation of the performance, satisfaction, and expectations for future success were treated as a dependent variable in successive 2 x 2 x 2 analyses of variance (Actor/Observer x Outcome x Gender). Results of these analyses are summarized in Table 1.

The outcome manipulation strongly affected attributions of actors and observers. People who succeeded were rated and rated themselves as having higher ability ($p < .01$), trying harder ($p < .01$), having an easier task ($p < .01$), and being luckier ($p < .01$) than those who were unsuccessful. Successful subjects were also rated by themselves and others as evaluating their performance higher ($p < .01$), as having greater satisfaction with their performance ($p < .01$), and as having higher expectancies for future outcomes ($p < .01$).

The patterns of causal attributions made by actors and observers in success and failure conditions are shown in Figure 1.[1]

In the figure, it can be seen that actors, relative to observers, tended to attribute their success more to the ease of the task and good luck (external factors) and their failure to task difficulty and bad luck. Observers, on the other hand, were more likely to attribute the actor's successes to high ability and high effort and the actor's failures to lack of effort. Thus, observers made more use of internal factors. These findings are reflected in the analysis of variance data.

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[1] The figure is drawn with reversal of task difficulty ratings so that they represent task ease. This allows easier comparison across the various ratings. Elsewhere in the text and in tables, higher task values refer to greater attributed difficulty.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance of Ratings Score

Source of Variance	*df*	*F* Values						
		Ability	Effort	Task Difficulty	Luck	Evaluation of Performance	Satisfaction	Future Performance
Actor-Observer (A)	1,232	(3.08)	4.20*	(3.08)	.13	21.79**	(3.85)	1.75
Outcome (B)	1,232	180.65**	36.01**	84.59**	16.66**	296.11**	323.35**	147.91**
Sex (C)	1,232	.74	.12	1.14	(2.76)	1.29	(3.00)	(2.81)
A x B	1,232	.42	8.01**	16.48**	(2.62)	1.06	.47	1.44
A x C	1,232	.72	1.29	(2.90)	1.91	.50	.79	.00
B x C	1,232	.29	.06	.01	.43	.50	1.22	2.19
A x B x C	1,232	.29	(3.03)	.08	2.16	.36	6.10*	2.55

(*p* < .10)
*p < .05
**p < .01

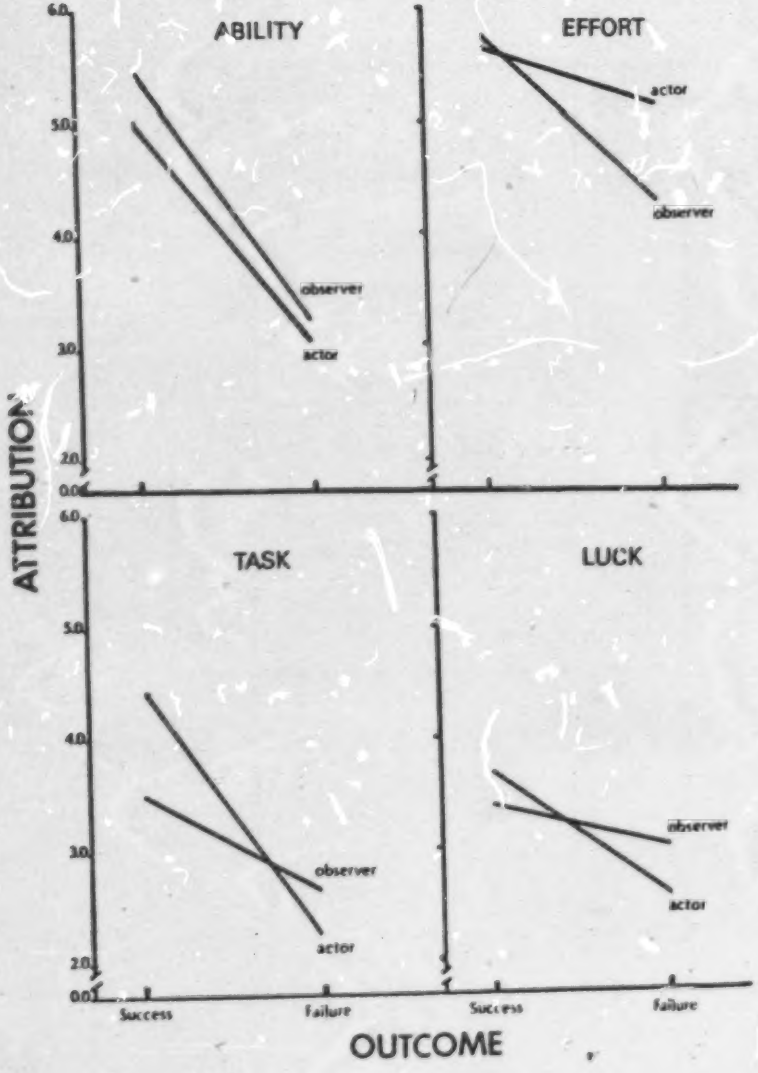

Figure 1. Attributions to ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck after success and failure for actors and observers.

As shown by the means in Table 2, there were several differences in the attributions made by actors and observers. Actors overall rated themselves as exerting more effort ($p < .05$) and evaluated their performance less highly ($p < .01$) than observers did. There were also some borderline significant effects which show some interesting trends. Thus, there were nonsignificant main effects for actors to see themselves as having lower ability ($p < .09$), while seeing the task as easier ($p < .09$) and feeling less satisfaction about the outcome ($p < .10$) than observers.

Table 2

Mean Rating Scores in Study I

Dependent Variables	Actor				Observer			
	Success[a]		Failure		Success		Failure	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Ability	5.17 (1.12)	5.00 (.98)	3.00 (1.51)	3.17 (1.28)	5.33 (1.21)	5.80 (.85)	3.13 (1.38)	3.40 (1.19)
Effort	5.53 (1.45)	5.73 (1.20)	5.33 (1.21)	4.86 (1.41)	5.77 (1.04)	5.77 (1.04)	4.03 (1.54)	4.53 (1.41)
Task Difficulty	3.80 (1.48)	3.47 (1.36)	5.80 (1.13)	5.72 (1.19)	4.23 (1.55)	4.77 (.93)	5.17 (1.55)	5.57 (1.04)
Luck	3.47 (1.36)	3.87 (1.36)	2.23 (1.04)	2.93 (1.46)	3.17 (1.42)	3.60 (1.69)	3.17 (1.29)	2.83 (1.39)
Evaluation of Performance	5.13 (1.10)	4.87 (1.19)	2.37 (1.21)	2.07 (1.10)	5.50 (1.38)	5.63 (.85)	3.23 (1.45)	2.97 (1.00)
Satisfaction	5.27 (1.23)	4.63 (1.50)	2.30 (1.34)	2.10 (1.08)	5.17 (1.37)	5.60 (.93)	2.77 (1.25)	2.07 (1.01)
Future Performance	5.37 (1.07)	5.07 (.91)	3.50 (1.33)	3.24 (1.33)	5.53 (1.10)	5.77 (1.41)	3.80 (1.69)	3.00 (1.41)

Note. Ratings were done on a 7-point scale with 1 representing none of the factors and 7 representing very much of the factor.

[a]Standard deviations in parentheses.

Along with these main effects for actor/observer differences, there were also interactions of actor/observer ratings and outcome. Observers tended to rate effort higher than actors for success and lower than actors for failure ($p < .01$). This would suggest that observers make more use of effort as a causal explanation for success and failure since actors show little variation in their ratings of their own effort for success and failure situations. On the other hand, actors did vary their ratings of task difficulty as a function of outcome more than observers ($p < .01$) and showed a trend ($p < .06$) for greater variation in luck ratings. When they succeeded, actors saw the task as being easier and themselves as being luckier than did observers. After failure, actors rated difficulty higher than observers did and perceived themselves as being unluckier.

The gender differences were generally nonsignificant. Women overall attributed their own and women actors' outcomes more to luck ($p < .10$) and had lower satisfaction ratings ($p < .10$) and lower expectancies for the future performances of women actors ($p < .10$). There was also a trend for female observers to perceive the task as most difficult while the female actor rated it as least difficult (Actor/Observer x Gender, $p < .10$). Finally, a triple interaction of actor/observer by outcome by gender ($p < .05$) indicated that the female who succeeded was rated by the observer as being more satisifed than she actually reported. The same tendency was found for males who failed: Males who failed were rated by the observer as more satisfied than the actor himself reported.

Study II

Although Study I failed to find significant differences in the attributions made by male and female observers or actors, other data suggest that males and females may be observed very differently (e.g., Frieze, in press; Saxe & Bar-Tal, Note 1). It was hypothesized that such sex effects

might be stronger when actors and observers were of different rather than the same sex. At least for females, there is support for this idea. In general, in recent studies females have been found to be less stereotypic than males when judging other females (Deaux & Taynor, 1973; Morris, Note 2).

A second study was conducted to determine if observers of actors of the same sex differed in their attributions from observers of actors of the opposite sex.

Method

Subjects for Study II were 114 students (63 males, 51 females) in an introductory psychology class who volunteered for the experiment. These subjects were drawn from the same population as the subjects of Study I. Study II repeated the procedure outlined for the "Observer" condition in the first study. In this study, however, subjects were asked to imagine a situation in which they observe an actor of the opposite sex, of about the same age. This person was referred to as Mr. A or Miss A.

Results

The data of Study II were analyzed together with data obtained in the Observer condition of Study I. This resulted in a 2 x 2 x 2 design (Outcome x Sex of Observer x Sex of Actor). As in Study I, each of the seven ratings was treated as a separate dependent variable. Results of these analyses are summarized in Table 3.

Once again, the outcome manipulation had the strongest effects upon all the ratings. Results were all in the same direction as Study I.

Looking first at main effects for the two sex variables, both sexes saw the task as more difficult for females ($p < .05$), and there was a non-

Table 3

Analysis of Variance of Ratings Score

Source of Variance	*df*	*F* Values						
		Ability	Effort	Task Difficulty	Luck	Evaluation of Performance	Satisfaction	Future Performance
Outcome (A)	1,226	247.10**	63.43*	26.21**	[illegible]**	264.23**	358.21**	137.61**
Sex of Observer (B)	1,226	(3.00)	.46	.50	1.18	.27	1.78	1.57
Sex of Actor (C)	1,226	.05	.68	4.82*	.72	.99	.18	.20
A x B	1,226	.09	.90	.01	.12	.00	(3.03)	2.03
A x C	1,226	.10	.30	.11	(2.98)	1.94	(3.63)	(2.86)
B x C	1,226	(3.55)	1.61	2.05	.67	.06	.00	4.27*
A x B x C	1,226	.20	.80	.08	1.83	.05	.00	(2.94)

(*p* < .10)
*p < .05
**p < .01

significant trend for males to give lower ability ratings overall than female observers did ($p < .09$). This latter result was modified, however, by an interaction between sex of actor and observer ($p < .07$), which indicated that the generally lower ratings male observers made were focused upon female actors. Females showed a slight, but nonsignificant tendency to rate female actors as having higher ability than male actors, but males clearly rated other males higher than they rated females.

Other interactions of outcome with sex of the actor also approached significance. Ratings of luck for females tended to correlate more with outcome than for male actors ($p < .09$), indicating a trend for observers to see luck as a more important causal factor for females than males. Also females were seen as more satisfied by success and dissatisfied by failure ($p < .06$). However, female observers showed a trend toward perceiving the actor as being less satisfied in success and failure situations than did male observers ($p < .09$). Finally, there was a difference in how observers thought actors would expect to do in the future. Male observers saw female actors as having higher expectancies than female observers thought they would (Sex of Observer x Sex of Actor Interaction, $p < .05$).

Discussion

The results of these two studies suggest that actors and observers do have somewhat different perceptions of the causes of success and failure in an achievement situation. These differences support Jones and Nisbett's (1971) contention that actors tend to attribute their own behavior to situational factors, while observers are more likely to see the actor's behavior resulting from the stable personal dispositions of the actor. In the studies reported here, actors more often used task difficulty and luck, both external or situational factors, as explanatory causes, while observers relied strongly upon effort as a causal attribution. Effort is clearly internal to the person,

but it has not typically been discussed as stable. Weiner et al. (1971) labeled effort as an unstable factor. However, more recent work has shown that effort may assume either stable or unstable characteristics (i.e., Weiner, 1972). Thus, someone may be seen as trying particularly hard or not trying at a specific task (unstable effort) or a person may be characterized as industrious or lazy (stable effort). A recent study by Saxe, Greenberg, and Bar-Tal (1974) indicates that "when effort attributions assume the status of traits, they are at least as stable, if not more so, than ability attributions" (p. 42). Thus, the tendency for observers to view actors' outcomes as influenced significantly by effort may be further supported by the Jones and Nisbett hypothesis that observers more often attribute the performances of actors to internal, stable characteristics in the actor. It should be noted that the present study extends the definition of the observer situation since it involves a written report about the actor's behavior. Thus, the actor/observer attributional differences may be generalized to situations in which an observer merely accepts an oral or written report about an actor's performance.

Jones and Nisbett (1971) and Weiner (1972) suggested that the differential attributions made by an actor and an observer may cause conflicts, especially in educational settings. It is easy to think about a possible situation in which a failing student discusses his or her performance with the teacher. The student will attempt to explain the failure by pointing to situational causes (e.g., bad luck or difficulty of the task), but the teacher instead believes that the failure is due to personal dispositions (e.g., laziness) of the student. Such differences could lead to distrust and discomfort, as well as to a generally poorer educational experience, especially if the underlying perceived causality in the situation is not clearly understood. However, it should be noted that the present study explores a situation that differs from a classroom situation. Additional research is needed in order to investigate the differential attributions of teachers and pupils as observers and actors.

The results of the present studies also support earlier work that had demonstrated the importance of outcome in influencing causal attributions (Feather & Simon, 1971; Friese & Weiner, 1971; Ruble, 1973). Both actors and observers overall made high ratings of ability and effort for success and task difficulty for failure. Similar data in previous studies has been explained as a bias toward self-enhancing attributions. It is most beneficial in terms of pride and shame experienced if one attributes success to internal factors and failure to external elements. However, looking at Figure 1 (page 9), it can be seen that observers tended to make the more positive attributions. They rated ability and effort relatively higher than actors for success and luck and task ease lower. On the other hand, observers appeared to perceive failure as more due to lack of effort and bad luck than actors. Thus, the observers appeared to be maximizing the self-esteem of the actor rather than the actor doing this. Similar findings were also reported by Feather and Simon (1971). Perhaps because of modesty on the part of the actors and/or identification by the observers with the actors, there does appear to be a trend for observers to be more supportive of actors than they are themselves in their attributional ratings.

Although the sex of the observer and actor had only a minor effect upon causal attributions made in the two studies, the data that did emerge suggested a general tendency toward stereotypic thinking by both sexes, but especially by male observers. Consistent with findings by Feldman-Summers and Kiesler (1974), the task was seen as more difficult for females. This might be due to the fact that females were seen as having lower ability by male observers, or it may represent a recognition that females often do have to accomplish more to achieve the same goals in our society. In either case, these results support numerous studies showing that females are not expected to perform as well as males on a variety of tasks (see Frieze, in press). A second trend was for females to be somewhat more likely to attribute their own successes to luck. If one feels that

her successes are the result of luck, she tends to feel less pride and to have lower future expectations than people attributing successes to effort and ability. The trend found here and in other studies for women to employ more luck attributions is debilitating and reinforces the notion that achievement tasks are more difficult for women. This is supported by the fact that male observers saw other males as having more satisfaction with their performances and as having higher expectancies for future success. Although these sex differences were relatively weak, it is somewhat discouraging in light of current feminist thinking that they emerged at all, given the power of the outcome and actor/observer manipulations in these studies.

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